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ABSTRACT

A sizeable and convincing body of research continues to indicate that children gain competence and confidence in using the English language when it is situated within a context that is at once purposive and pleasurable. Both empirical and anecdotal evidence suggest that exposure to a wide variety of good children's literature provides an effective expedient for the absorption and integration of new vocabulary and structures. Stories, especially those with repetitive, predictable and rhythmic patterns, establish an engaging setting for simultaneously promoting the meaning and melody of the language. A review of some of the research and some of the fairy tales, poems, and fables that second language learners of all ages find inviting lends support to the notion that instructional protocol for English as a second language ought to devote commensurate amounts of time to helping youngsters become attentive not just to the interactional and instrumental functions of the language, but to the imaginative ones as well. A bibliography of suggested children's literature for the English as a second language (ESL) classroom is included. (Author/MSE)

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Paper presented at the 22nd Annual TESOL Convention
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John P. Travers

ABSTRACT

"Tunes For Bears To Dance To"

A sizeable and convincing body of research continues to indicate that children gain competence and confidence in using the English language when it is situated within a context that is at once purposive and pleasurable. Both empirical and anecdotal evidence suggest that exposure to a wide variety of good children's literature provides an effective expedient for the absorption and integration of new vocabulary and structures. Stories, especially those with repetitive, predictable and rhythmic patterns, establish an engaging setting for simultaneously promoting the meaning and melody of the language.

This paper will share some of the research and some of the fairy tales, poems, and fables that second language learners of all ages find inviting and even irresistible. It will support the notion that our ESL instructional protocol ought to devote commensurate amounts of time toward helping youngsters become attentive not just to the interactional and instrumental functions of the language, but to the imaginative ones as well.

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"TUNES FOR BEARS TO DANCE TO"

1. INTRODUCTION

The title of my presentation has nothing to do with the recent collapse of the stock market so those of you here for investment advice will sorely be disappointed. Actually, a Ron Wallace (1983) collection of poems is the source of this title which "caught my ear" as it were.

The bibliography has been organized by author only. I've never been quite organized enough to divide and subdivide the titles into themes (eg. weather, seasons, emotions). However, that's both a plus and a minus. It makes it slightly more difficult to use when you are looking for a particular book for a specific reason or season, but it also allows for a great deal of freedom, flexibility and choice. For instance, I like to use Eric Carle's The Very Hungry Caterpillar as part of a unit on butterflies in the Fall. The children have seen and caught them in their nets all summer; using them in a different context in another season adds some spontaneity and serendipity to the second language instructional setting. Children carefully note details about color, size, shape and the various localities and habitats that support the butterflies. They construct charts, develop stories, sing songs, recite poems, make dioramas and engage in a wide variety of other activities designed to promote language and thought concomitantly.

All this is contextualized within a framework that encourages questions and explorations. It attempts to build in youngsters the notion that learning is very much a non-linear process and the road not taken is often every bit as interesting and valuable as the right

answers (when and where they do exist). Errors are not only welcomed - they're needed. Arriving at a particular destination is only part of the fun!

The solutions to all sorts of authentic problems, academic and otherwise, are rarely as manifest as they appear in the classroom. Only in school are all the answers known. Often, the solutions to our most intriguing problems require not so much recalling which answer is appropriate in this or that context, but rather a way of thinking that investigates options, values taking a risk and makes defensible judgments based on available data and observable patterns. "Embracing contraries" is the term Peter Elbow (1986) uses and it signifies a mind that looks for discrepencies and contradictions, a mind enlivened by inquisitiveness and a sense of discovery. It is a way of thinking that is confident and comfortable enough with not knowing even as it continues to work toward solutions from provisional insights and listening to the experience of others. It values equally the algorithms of the analytical mind and impromptu hunches of the intuitive thinker (Bruner, 1963). A sign in the offices of a major corporate executive metaphorically accentuates this way of thinking: "You've got to kiss a lot of frogs to find a prince."

Creating a milieu for this kind of language learning, using a literature-based curriculum for posing and solving problems, contravenes the reductionist view of education as an amalgam of pre-ordained skills and identifiable outcomes all neatly packaged and measurable so that even members of the school board can read them! It envisions all language lessons having a center of gravity rooted in a highly informal and interactive process complete with the inevitable attendant errors

and mistakes that distinguish such an undertaking. John Holt (1967) argues that this is the natural way children learn:

> They see the world as a whole, mysterious perhaps, but a whole none the less. They do not divide it up into airtight little categories as we adults tend to do. It is natural for them to jump from one thing to another, and to make the kinds of connections that are rarely made in formal classes and textbooks. They make their own paths into the unknown, paths that we would never think of making for them. (p. 167)

Language lessons that promote discussions rather than diagnosis and pep-talks instead of prescriptions help youngsters build associations between their own experiences and what they read enabling them to sense the consanguinity between life and literature. The myriad and spontaneous detours that good stories allow instill in second language learners the confidence to find their own voice using the language to mean what they say and say what they mean. Daniel Fader (1976) puts it this way:

> The single most reliable source of language you have is your own voice. Listen to it, write what it speaks, and you are likely to have made your meaning as clear as you need to make it. (p. 37)

Not all of the discussions have distinguishable signposts and endpoints. Some are speculative and very tentative while others are given over solely to the imaginative world that children so effortlessly inhabit. The classroom work that flows from these discussions respects the understanding that there are several ways of knowing (Gardiner, 1983), that fluency requires both knowledge and know-how and that the "subordination of teaching to learning" (Gattegno, 1970) invigorates lessons and learners alike. Where do the butterflies overwinter? How long do they travel without rest? Are they ever homesick? Or afraid?

Do they return in the spring to the same home? Even where there are no clear answers, children are asked to suggest some possibiltiies. Garcia Marquez (1967) thinks they all go to the teeming groves of Macondo. How about that? Maybe? What do you think? Where is Macondo anyway? Initially, many of the youngsters will be thrown off guard, being asked questions the answers for which are not readily discernible. But if the questions and the explanations for those questions become irresistible enough, if they energize the children sufficiently so that the language is something they see as usable and companionable for their own purposes, then acquiring a second language will be less something that "has" to be done and more like something that youngsters want to do. If we are able to captivate their imaginations and stir their sense of wonder at the same time we instill in them a love for the language and its proper use, we will have provided them with the faith that they have something to say and the language in which to say it (Donald Murray, 1979). Supporting that faith naturally opens up new territories for further language use and practice. It appreciably enhances the perception of being knowledgeable and spurs the drive to know more, fueling the process in a reciprocal fashion. As with virtually all our learning, language included, success breeds success and we are far more likely to persist and improve in those areas that already have given us a satisfying and rewarding experience of ourselves.

It is important, I think, not to become too lock-step in our instructional protocol. Reading a Spring book in the Fall might prompt some unusual insights or questions. It might pose a problem that had never been considered, a pattern never seen, or a solution never imagined. In any case, it will demand using the language in a

purposeful way, encouraging both fluency and enjoyment through a spirit of inquiry and thoughtfulness.

In short, the unit on butterflies places a premium on having children respond to literature in a variety of ways. It asks them to use language to investigate, to explore, to propose questions and seek solutions to unknown topics. The focus invariably is on meaning and making sense of things, defining problems, connecting ideas using what you know and what you know how to do. It distinguishes between "natural communication" and "linguistic manipulation" (Burt and Dulay, 1978:184) with a strong bias toward the former on the premise that language learning in particular has a strong social and personal character (Goodman, 1986). All this in the belief that extensive and elaborate use of the language in this process nurtures the interests and abilities of children and constructs, in Jerome Bruner's term, the "scaffolding" required for growth and competence.

2. "Any fish'll bite if you got good bait"

The bibliography is neither exhaustive nor definitive. It should be read more like a personal mosaic of very fine children's literature appropriate for a variety of ESL classrooms and contexts. To be sure, not all of these books will be serviceable in each and every situation, and a small number might only be used in some very constrained settings. But I've tried to craft the selections with an eye toward casting as wide a net as possible, attempting to be more inclusive than exclusive and to offer a rich and varied menu of literature designed both to instruct and entertain.

There was no ostensible litmus test for inclusion, but the choices were not made at random either. One of the more enjoyable things about putting together a bibliography is the opportunity to exercise some editorial control and preference. I have used all of the books in this bibliography in a number of ESL programs in New York City over the past twenty years, but there are a few caveats that I would like to share with you.

Some of the books (James and the Giant Peach, Sarah Plain and Tall, Pigs Might Fly) could conceivably be read aloud as chapter books to older students whose sole recommendation for an ESL program is that they don't read. In New York City, we have large numbers of children who have no trouble picking up the language of the street (they are admirably conversant with both schoolyard English and barnyard English), but fail to measure up to the literacy standards required for being labeled independent in English and mainstreamed in the regular school environment. For these youngsters, it is at least as important to cultivate the belief in the joy of reading as it is to provide the skills necessary to become literate. William James (1962:56) once remarked that "faith in a fact can help create the fact" and nowhere is that more self-evident than in helping youngsters decipher the magic of print.

Other books have been included simply because the authors were born in Brooklyn! Seriously, E.B. White, Margaret Wise Brown, Ezra Jack Keats are all well-known, respected and highly regarded in the field of children's literature. Still others stand out and exemplify the very best of the illustrator's art: Clement Hurd, Garth Williams, Tomie dePaola, Stephen Kellogg, Maurice Sendak, Eric Carle, Robert Lawson,

Donald Crews and Arnold Lobel have each contributed immeasurably to our understanding and appreciation of the richly detailed world of young children. In the best children's literature, the illustrator provides a melody that both augments and illuminates the printed text (Moser, 1986). Robert Frost once said that the aim of education was to take youngsters from "where they are and bring them to where they ain't." In a very real sense, the illustrator attempts to do the very same thing with written text, i.e., give it a meaning that the words alone are unable to suggest. Ned Rorem (1988), using another metaphor, makes the exact same point arguing that music, like the language of dolphins, is not translatable into prose. If it were, there would be no need for music to exist. Music, in Rorem's view, provides a distinctive language appropriate for the expression of certain feelings and thoughts in a way that words could never approximate. In the best work, both author and illustrator complement each other in a synergistic fashion forging a coherence and artistic unity that captivates not only the imagination of children, but the child in all of us.

And finally, some books were included because they seemed to be excellent examples of a particular theme or feeling, value or inspiration. But for the most part, these books were simply delightful "reads." Kids of varying abilities enjoyed the stories, relished the experiences and became genuinely attached to some of the books as evidenced by their wanting to hear many of the same stories over and over again. They developed what John Bowlby (1969) calls, in another context, "attachment behaviors" where rereading certain stories orally seemed to provide a sense of security and rewarding predictability that so often remained illusive in their own everyday lives. These same

stories often provided real places of comfort, places of delight, places invested with a certain healing capacity. They afforded many of the youngsters "protective custody" from the harsh and pervasive impoverishment that too frequently sullies the urban landscape.

3. Good Books: Where The Wild Things Are

Reading aloud good stories to children of all ages provides a wonderful opportunity for us to model the process by demonstrating how good readers make sense of what they are reading. It is, in the words of Becoming a Nation of Readers (1985, p. 23), "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading." It mimics the informality and warmth of the bedtime story and allows us to connect children with texts, crafted with a great deal of care and precision - texts that they might not otherwise have access to. A number of researchers (Trelease, 1982; Krashen, 1983) have provided impressive evidence to support the proposition that when children are read to they begin to internalize the vocabulary and structures of the language and develop a genuine disposition to read for both information and enjoyment. Young children exposed to the language of books begin to absorb and use that language in a variety of real and imaginative contexts. Over time, in Frank Smith's words (1988) "they listen like a talker" and through demonstration and engagement they gradually begin to see themselves as "members of the club" which, among other things, is a risk-free affiliation:

> A child striving to read or write something is helped and encouraged, not given a low grade and a program of exercises. Members of the literacy club are people who read and write, even the beginners, and the fact that one is not very competent yet is no reason for exclusion or ridicule. A newcomer is the same kind of person as the most proficient

> club member, except that he or she hasn't yet had as much experience. It is the same in all normal sports and recreational clubs. (p.11)

But for too many youngsters and far too many ESL students, reading is like root canal. It demands excruciating attention to minutiae that often has only a marginal relevance to the reasons why we come to books in the first place. The phonics skill/drill seatwork with endless exercises in circling the correct answer, filling in the blanks and underlining the best choice all send kids a message that reading is for getting the right answers and finishing your work on time. Using print for these kinds of ersatz reasons trivializes its importance with a menagerie of inconsequential details and dissociates it from its real intentions. It jeopardizes a love of literacy with disingenuous stories crafted to the contours of readability formulas. All too often, such stories are accompanied by questions insufficiently important enough to encourage children to apply the needed effort required for becoming competent readers.

Instead, we ought to share with kids the idea that we read for many of the same reasons that we go fishing or hiking in the woods: to see what we think, chart our own course, clarify our perceptions and sail with the buoys that speak to us. We read, as Eudora Welty (1984) has so eloquently reminded us, to listen to that "reader-voice" within ourselves that provides the meaning and the melody of the printed word:

> Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn't hear. As my eyes followed the sentence, a voice was saying it to me silently. It isn't my mother's voice, or the voice of any person I can identify, certainly not my own .... The cadence, whatever it is that asks you to believe, the feeling that resides in the printed word, reaches me through the reader-voice. (pp 11- 12)

It makes eminent sense then to provide generous and unmitigated amounts of time given over to allowing youngsters to listen to the language embedded in contexts that sharpen their sensitivity and awareness of the language as a tool for making meaning and having fun.

Helping youngsters become Hooked On Books (Fader, 1976) develops both the attachment and habituation of seeing books as partners and provides an efficacious expedient for promoting both language learning and literacy. Through stories, children are able to exorcise some of the demons and monsters that intermittantly roam through the young mind. Reading a book like Where The Wild Things Are can provide a catharsis for some frightened young children who may be unable to verbalize their fears. Recently, Maurice Sendak reported some of his fears as a young child:

> I've been thinking lately about the monsters - or fantasies or whatever - that frightened me as a child, and that probably frightened me into being an artist. I can only come up with a few. My parents, of course. The vacuum cleaner, which still frightens me. My sister. A very few ordinary horrors from movies, books, the radio. The Lindbergh kidnapping. And finally, school, for which I had a passionate loathing. (p.1)

In helping children over the hurdles and frustrations that are almost impossible to avoid, literature can provide a sanctuary where children are rescued from the turmoil and confusion that informs the school life of so many second language learners. Through exposure to good books, we can provide for our students a learning climate that reduces fear and anxiety and builds the trust and self-confidence that are needed to make each child a winner. Good children's literature has a restorative power for the imagination and enriches the lives of all children by sharing with them the unaccountable variety and range of ideas, emotions and realities that are part of being human. Good books

provide good language which feeds good minds strengthening the capacity to imagine and abstract. In Maria Montessori's words (1968, p. 184) "these two powers of the mind (imagination and abstraction) which go beyond the simple perception of things actually present, play a mutual part in the construction of the mind's content. Both are necessary for the building up of language."

And lastly, a rich and inviting library of good books in the ESL classroom helps create a place that gratuitously celebrates the worth and dignity of each child. It encourages youngsters to play "the believing game" (Elbow, 1973, p. 147) by providing two of the most important items not listed on anyone's taxonomy: Friendship and fantasy. Since these two themes have been explored sensitively and brilliantly by one of Brooklyn's most celebrated authors, E. B.White (1952, p. 164), he will have the last word:

> "Why did you do all this for me?" he asked. "I don't deserve it. I've never done anything for you."
>
> "You have been my friend," replied Charlotte. "That in itself is a tremendous thing. I wove my webs for you because I liked you. After all, what's a life, anyway? We're born, we live a little while, we die. A spider's life can't help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift my own life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of that. (p. 164)

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***Appropriate for intermediate and advanced ESL Students.**